



CITY OF PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Municipal Building Blue Ribbon Committee

Wednesday, August 27, 2025 at 3:30 p.m.

Conference Room A, City Hall

1 Junkins Avenue, Portsmouth, NH

Meeting Minutes

[These minutes were amended on 10/2/25 to include a committee-requested correction.]

Committee Members Present: Councilor John Tabor (Co-Chair), Councilor Kate Cook (Co-Chair), City Manager Karen Conard (via Zoom), Planning Board Chair Rick Chellman, *Police Commissioner Buzz Scherr**, Peter Weeks, Mary Lou McElwain, John O’Leary, Cameron Horack

**Police Commissioner Scherr is the new Police Commission representative, replacing Chair Kate Coyle.*

Committee Members Not Present: Police Chief Mark Newport, Renee Plummer

Members of the Design Team: Richard Marx (JSA), Rodney McManus (ADG via Zoom)

Staff Present: Deputy City Manager Carl Weber, Deputy Chief Mike Maloney, Department of Public Works Director Peter Rice, Facilities Manager Joe Almeida, Executive Assistant Jackie Burnett (minute taker)

- I. **Roll Call**
Roll Call was conducted at 3:04 PM.
- II. **Approval of July 23, 2025 Minutes**
John O’Leary moved to approve the minutes; seconded by Mary Lou McElwain. Motion passed unanimously (8-0-3)
- III. **City of Bangor, Maine – Lessons Learned**

Jefferson Davis (City of Bangor, ME) joined via Zoom to share takeaways from their City Hall renovation – a retrofit of a former post office. Pre-COVID plans were aimed at consolidating all public-facing departments on the first floor. The three-story building is similar in size and scale to Portsmouth City Hall.

- a. In response to Cameron Horack, Jefferson noted Bangor's daytime population swells from 30K to 90K due to its regional hub status. Floorplans showed a central public hub with secure staff areas. Renovations addressed outdated systems, poor lighting, and inefficiencies, adding bulletproof teller windows, lobby redesign, soundproofing, and a rooftop HVAC. Council Chambers also received upgrades.
- b. Councilor John Tabor asked if the chambers square footage changed; Jefferson said by ~30-40 square feet. Peter Weeks asked about the duration of the renovation. Jefferson stated the project took approximately 20 months to complete.
- c. Police Commissioner Buzz Scherr asked about employee operations during construction. Jefferson explained that nearly 100 staff members were moved to a rented facility due to construction noise and dust triggering fire alarms. Rental costs weren't part of the construction contract and will be shared with City Manager Conard at the request of Peter Weeks.
- d. Cameron Horack asked if the project was phased. Jefferson said no – phasing would have added ~\$500,000, which instead covered temporary space needs.
- e. City Manager Conard asked about budget. The initial estimate was \$6M post-COVID, but final construction cost reached ~\$10M (due to inflation, safety upgrades, ADA elevator, generator). Rental/relocation costs not included.
- f. Peter Weeks asked about the total square footage of the building. Jefferson replied that the first-floor renovation covered approximately 14,000 square feet, while the second and third floors (which included ceiling grid replacement, mechanical updates, and elevator lobbies) each encompassed approximately 11,000 square feet.

Jefferson noted that a major design consideration was storage. To maximize space, the city used high-density filing systems (not fire-rated) and stored vital records in a fireproof safe. Staff were also moved from offices to cubicles – initial pushback had since eased.

- g. Mary Lou McElwain asked about digitizing paper files. Jefferson confirmed the city had not yet completed this task but plans to hire a third-party vendor to digitize the large volume of physical records.

Jefferson showed photos of teller windows (ADA-compliant, bulletproof, opening large enough to pass a license plate through) and noted granite was repointed. Public bathrooms remained unchanged to reduce cost, no added insulation to exterior walls.

- h. Peter Weeks asked what they'd do differently – Jefferson said better coordination of IT/AV/security under the general contractor.
- i. Facilities Manager Joe Almeida asked about temporary office space upfitting. Jefferson confirmed the space they rented was already furnished; only a keycard system was installed. Consultant fees totaled ~\$1M; construction manager cost for 28

months ~ \$600K; other soft costs included a 20-month rental of an IT trailer (\$1,000/month), plus security and related expenses.

- j. Peter Weeks requested a full cost breakdown. Jefferson will send the information to City Manager Conard, estimating 10-15% in soft costs and 10% in change orders (industry average is 10-12%).
- k. Councilor Tabor asked about heating. Jefferson explained they use mini-split heat pumps as the primary system; new boilers serve as backup using forced hot water.

IV. Summary of Police Department Matrix Report

- a. Peter Weeks noted Police Department performance is strong with only 62 officers (vs. 70 authorized). Councilor John Tabor emphasized the need to review the analysis from a long-term (20-30 year) planning perspective.
- b. Police Commissioner Buzz Scherr cautioned current staffing levels are unsustainable and hurt retention.
- c. Cameron Horack added that overtime burdens for police and fire are unsustainable, especially as dispatch relies on them, too.
- d. Deputy Chief Mike Maloney thanked Deputy City Manager Carl Weber and Monte Bohanan for compiling the report summary. He said the report was a response to public perception of 70% staffing growth, when actual growth is modestly reflected. He clarified that minimum staffing levels govern response time, not total headcount. Current strain impacts officer well-being.
- e. John O'Leary reminded the group that setting PD staffing is a City Council function – not this committee's role. Commissioner Scherr and Councilor Tabor agreed the study's purpose is to inform space needs.
- f. Cameron Horack commented that the summary table and recommendations should help to focus the group's discussion.
- g. John O'Leary stressed the need for accurate public messaging and clarity around committee work.

V. Questions for JSA from Committee Members

Richard Martz (JSA) said their team is in the initial programming phase, collecting existing documents and meeting with departments to define space needs, staffing levels, and adjacencies. They're further along on the PD space due to the Matrix report.

Rodney McManus (ADG) said their team did the original space needs assessment several years ago and reviewed the Matrix report, but some items need discussion with PD/City staff to resolve discrepancies. A key difference in this iteration: the inclusion of City Hall, allowing a more holistic, efficient design.

- a. Cameron Horack asked if discrepancies between the ADG and Matrix reports were documented. DPW Director Peter Rice said discussions have not yet occurred.
- b. Richard addressed several feasibility questions raised by committee members:
 - 1. *Basement Improvements*: windows/HVAC possible, but dependent on cost and layout. Rodney said windowless areas (evidence, storage) could be relocated there. Peter Weeks called it a "dungeon"; Commissioner Scherr mentioned water/mold issues. Richard said a full HVAC upgrade is likely.

2. *Elevator Access*: Peter Weeks raised public access concerns. Richard said if PD takes over an elevator, another option will be added for public access – through this could be mitigated by relocating more departments to the first floor.
 3. *Potential Expansion*: Peter Weeks asked about 10,000-12,000 sq. ft. addition off rear (near Clerk/Tax Offices). Richard said it's feasible, but traffic flow will be a challenge.
 4. *Parking Lot Reconfiguration*: Possible reconfiguration will be evaluated.
 5. *City Hall Entrance*: Likely outcome. Councilor Tabor said it's a priority.
 6. *Phased Construction*: Required – relocation of all staff isn't feasible. Peter Weeks asked about temporary space; Director Rice said past options were costly. Commissioner Scherr said PD relocation is especially difficult; Cameron Horack said internal PD shifts to other areas of the building could be explored. Councilor Cook added that the Clerk's office is also difficult to move (vault/safe).
 7. *Underutilized Space*: Will be identified.
 8. *Reconfiguring PD Entrance*: Possible – JSA will explore options.
- c. John O'Leary emphasized this is a fluid process and final answers will come with time. He encouraged idea-sharing and open discussion.
 - d. Cameron Horack added that the committee is in capable hands with JSA.
 - e. Commissioner Buzz Scherr asked about total cost estimates. Richard said they'll come late 2025 or early 2026. The focus now is on defining space needs.
 - f. Mary Lou McElwain asked about the flat roof near Conference Room A. Facilities Manager Joe Almeida said it could be removed, or skylights added to daylight the PD below – but adding on could block light to floors above.
 - g. Councilor Kate Cook asked if the School Department would be included in planning. Director Rice said all departments are being consulted.
 - h. Planning Board Chair Rick Chellman suggested expansion on the south wing/rear for better ADA access without impacting traffic. Richard agreed and said both areas would be evaluated further.
 - i. Councilor Kate Cook raised concerns about the main entrance to City Hall (requires going up a level). Suggested rethinking the layout.
 - j. Peter Weeks said some public feedback questioned why the PD isn't rebuilt at Foundry Place. He emphasized that this is not within the committee's charge. Commissioner Scherr and Facilities Manager Almeida reiterated that past studies showed it was cost prohibitive.
 - k. Councilor John Tabor asked if reconciling the ADG and Matrix reports should be on the next agenda. Director Rice questioned the value in devoting time to this, as the Matrix study assumed a blank slate, while this project involves working within an existing structure – worth reviewing key differences but not a major focus.

VI. **New Business**

- a. City Manager Karen Conard advised managing expectations – JSA won't have new updates every two weeks. She recommended meeting only when there is something to review. Cameron Horack agreed and said cadence could be revisited later.

A motion was made by John O'Leary to move the next meeting to Wednesday, October 1st at 3:00 PM; seconded by Cameron Horack. Motion passed unanimously (8-0-3)

VII. **Public Comment** – none.

VIII. **Future Meetings & Adjournment**

Next meeting: October 1 @ 3:00 PM.

A motion to adjourn the meeting was made by John O'Leary; seconded by Cameron Horack. Motion passed unanimously (8-0-3).

Meeting adjourned at 4:16 p.m.